Special Issue in Online and Remote Coaching: Exploring Coaching Delivery and Coach Education in Online/Digital Environments

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As research in the field of coaching and coach development continues to expand, new ideas, new concepts, and alternative paradigms challenge our current understanding of how coaches might work effectively in different environments/contexts. While online coaching and coach education were growing in popularity before the COVID19 pandemic (Bennett, 2020, 2021), many coaches and coach educators were challenged by the pivot from in-person toward online and remote delivery to meet restriction guidelines during the pandemic. In order for coaches and coach educators to continue to operate in online/digital environments, Cushion and Townsend (2019) suggest that this requires the implementation of a range of technology-enhanced learning strategies. As a result, this became an opportunity to explore new and exciting ways to deliver coaching sessions remotely. Yet, as Hew and Cheung (2013) cautioned a decade earlier, the use of technology-enhanced learning strategies does not guarantee successful educative delivery in online/digital environments. Rather, research is needed to provide an understanding of how and when to leverage online/remote interactions to enhance athlete/coach learning, particularly in the postpandemic era. Thus, as we emerge from the restrictions presented by the pandemic, we are delighted to present the field with the first special issue focusing on effective coaching and coach development in online/digital environments.

For the purposes of this special issue, we have attempted to provide a working definition of what constitutes online/digital delivery of coaching and coach education. In doing so, we consider Simonson and Seepersaud’s (2019) concept of distance education and align this to the sports coaching/coach education context. Thus, online/digital delivery may be defined as:

Coaching or coach education related to a sport where interactive technologies are used to connect learners, resources, and instructors at times when the learning group is physically separated.

Within this working definition, we accept that the integration of online/digital environments has become an intertwined aspect of how we communicate, build relationships, work, and socialize. We concede that a definitive description may act to limit future directions of this emerging field. However, we are hopeful that this initial designation can encourage scholarship to explore how coaching and coach education in online/digital environments might impact the psychosocial developments of the learner, which extends beyond the current focus on exercise prescription and skill acquisition (e.g., Casey & Jones, 2011, Koekoek et al., 2018). To this end, this special issue explores the efficacy of coaching approaches in online spaces, and how, for example, effective connections can be made between coach developers with coaches, and coaches with their athletes, in order to facilitate successful sport-specific learning.

This special issue includes articles from the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Australia, United States, Canada, and Ghana. The majority of the articles come from five English-speaking, Western countries. This reflects the current state of where coach education and practice scholarship mainly emerge. However, we are especially proud to include an all-African authorship team submission to ISCJ (see Lugaterah et al.’s article in this special issue). In this article, a descriptive analysis is presented to outline how African coaches used different technologies when coaching remotely during COVID-19. A significant finding is that the use of tools such as video and mobile phones relies on the extent to which technological infrastructure (i.e., Wi-Fi) has been developed.

Four of the studies presented in this special issue explore the use of technology for effective online/digital coaching practice, while five studies focus on coach education in online/digital environments. Findings from both strands within this special issue (e.g., FYall and colleagues’ article and Leeder and colleagues’ article) emphasise that effective delivery within online/digital contexts relies on sound underlying pedagogies. Notably, a recurring finding suggests that coaching or educating coaches within online/digital environments has the potential to enhance connections between the coach and athlete (see Blanchfield and colleagues’ findings in this special issue) and coach educators and coaches (see Langdon et al.’s findings in this special issue). Encouragingly, the scholarship presented in this special issue suggests that, when accompanied by thoughtful pedagogy, the connections formed in the online/digital environment allow coaches to enhance psychosocial competencies. This includes intra/interpersonal skills that are central to athlete-centred coaching practices (see Taylor et al.’s article), which is also seen to result in effectively building the relationship with the athletes (see Eagles & Callary’s article).

From a methodological perspective, five studies in this special issue used a qualitative approach (e.g., Hodgson et al.’s article), two studies were quantitative in nature (e.g., Langdon et al.’s article), with the remaining two being mixed method (e.g., Murray et al.’s article). The qualitative studies are all situated within the interpretivist paradigm, whereby truth is subjective,
multiple, and co-constructed through social interaction. We invite researchers to explore other possible research methodologies and approaches to broaden our understanding of effective coaching and coach education in online/digital environments. For example, new materialism as a research paradigm situated within a post-constructionist ontological turn offers researchers “ways in which heterogeneous elements (i.e., technology) of the social-and-material world constitute each other over time” (Monforte & Smith, 2021, p. 7). Szedlak et al. (2022) suggested that an enhanced connection when coaching in an online/digital environment could be linked to connectivism, a novel onto-epistemological approach, which is an expression of new materialism (Downes, 2012; Siemens, 2005). Connectivism attempts to make sense of the networked world we live in by aiming to connect the idea of how the social and material world relate and interact with each other to produce truth (Davidson & Glassner, 2016). Given the different social interactions in online and digital environments, understanding how these are related to the technology themselves, and how the intermingling of social and technological impacts coaching and coach education, may support the extension of this fledgling research topic.

Bennett and Szedlak (2023) argue that researchers should consider frameworks and theories that have been developed and designed for learning in the digital age. This could include considering coaching and coach education interventions on the philosophical grounds of Thomas and Brown’s (2011) New Culture of Learning. New Culture of Learning is primarily concerned with how, in the 21st century, educators can cultivate a learner’s imagination, playfulness, and ability to question, which places the coach (or coach educator) as “facilitator” to encourage autonomous learning. Similarly, heutagogy is a pedagogical approach that champions self-determined learning (Hase & Kenyon, 2013; McCarthy & Stoszkowski, 2018; Stoszkowski & Collins, 2018). Exploring heutagogy in online educative encounters from coach development to coaching more specifically could also be a useful line of inquiry. We are aware that our example of considering alternative paradigms focuses on qualitative methodology; however, we equally encourage researchers to advance quantitative and mixed-methods approaches, for example, critical realism and postpositivism.

The point we wish to emphasize is this: The emerging field of coach/coach education research in online/digital environments lends itself to innovative ways of conducting research and practice. In essence, coaches and coach educators working in online/digital environments should consistently seek out approaches that fit the needs and desires of 21st century learners—which includes accessing a multitude of digital and/or technological platforms to engage with new and existing knowledges (Glassner & Back, 2020). The emergence of scholarship in this area demonstrates an exciting evolution in the way(s) in which the roles of the coach/coach educator are being conceptialized. The articles accepted for publication here can provide inspiration and guidance for researchers and practitioners to build upon what constitutes effective online learning. As the technology that impacts our lives continues to progress, it is necessary for the wider scholarly community to think beyond traditional approaches. This requires the courage to step away from the “norm,” and challenge the notion that what works for in-person approaches also applies to online/digital learning. Indeed, successful learning resulting in enhanced sporting performance from coach delivery in online/digital contexts depends on it. Thus, we hope that this special issue will encourage readers to go beyond our suggestions to further our collective understanding of what constitutes effective athlete-centered coaching and learner-centered coach education in online/digital environments.

Producing this special issue has been a collective effort. We extend our gratitude to the contributors, who worked tirelessly to submit, revise, and resubmit manuscripts, resulting in high-quality articles. A special thanks to the reviewers and to Dr Bettina Callary, Editor-in-Chief, for their critical, constructive feedback, and support. It is our hope that the work presented here will provide the field with much needed insights, perspectives, and approaches to evolve our discipline in ways that are commensurate with the digital age.

References


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